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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that children who witness violence in their homes and neighborhoods may not be as resilient as medical and mental health specialists once believed. This article presents an interview with Betsy McAlister Groves, director of the Child Witness to Violence Project at the Boston Medical Center, one of the first programs in the country to provide counseling, advocacy, and outreach services for children age 8 or younger who have witnessed violence, particularly in their families. Topics discussed include how children are referred to the program, symptoms of a child who is suffering, the effects of witnessing violence on a child's development, the ability for children to heal, and how state and federal agencies are reacting to this new information about children who witness violent acts. (GCP)

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Hidden Victims: Caring for Children Who Witness Violence

by Caitlin Johnson

They are the "bystanders" to violence, the indirect victims, cowering, crying, wide awake even in the dead of night. Children who witness violence in their homes and neighborhoods, recent studies suggest, may not be as resilient as medical and mental health specialists once believed. It turns out that kids exposed to violence—especially the estimated 3.3 million to 10 million kids a year who've seen brutality between people they love and trust—are often as traumatized as those who are directly victimized.

Betsy McAlister Groves directs the Child Witness to Violence Project at the Boston Medical Center, one of the first programs in the country to provide counseling, advocacy and outreach services for children age 8 or younger who have witnessed violence, particularly in their families. Groves is on leave this year, working under a fellowship from the Open Society Institute to complete a book and series of papers about the impact on children of witnessing domestic and community violence. I spoke with her on March 7, 2000.

What sorts of situations have the children you treat been witness to?

A range of things. We treat children who have witnessed numerous verbal fights between parents, including some where the child heard his father threatening to kill his mother and kidnap the children. We also see kids who've seen physical assaults between parents, and on up to the worst form of violence, which is fatal domestic violence. We have several kids who are with us because they have seen their mothers murdered.

We also treat children who have seen community violence: fights or stabbings on the

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street, we've seen some children who come from countries where there is war, and also children who witnessed or found suicide victims. And one who was in fire—she was physically unharmed but terrified.

Only recently have the parents, lawmakers and practitioners been aware of the group of children who are witnesses. Domestic violence is the worst kind of violence that children can be exposed to. It occurs in home, a supposed safe place—but this violates that sense of safety.

How are children referred to the program?
Parents, most often. But we also work with the courts and other groups. An exciting aspect of our program is our strong collaboration with police, who often see kids when responding to domestic violence calls. We teach an 18-hour seminar for cops on child development and how to intervene and respond to children affected by violence. The police leave our card with the victim and the family.

This kind of thing is not widespread in other states, but I think it's vital. To be successful, you need community collaboration and partnerships. It cannot be solely a mental health agency or law enforcement issue, no one can do it alone.

How can you recognize when a child is suffering? Are there common "symptoms"?
We work with children age 8 and under, and the behaviors that we tend to see are sleep disturbances, increased separation anxiety or worry about a parent's safety, changes in behavior, intrusive thoughts or memories about the violence, chronic anxiety, and increased somatic complaints. These include things like headaches, stomachaches, vague complaints, and body aches.

It's important to mention that these symptoms can indicate a number of stresses that traumatized children contend with, not just witnessing domestic or community violence. There's no easy way to know. But if a teacher or adult is concerned about a child's behavior, they should consider that witnessing violence might be one of the causes. We also stress routine screening in doctor's offices and pediatric health clinics for domestic

violence.

These children are hidden victims, because for obvious reasons, they're uncomfortable or ashamed to talk about parental violence. And unlike abuse, where you might see bruises, you just don't know.

What effect does witnessing violence have on children and their development?
Children are affected in all arenas of development by witnessing violence: emotionally, socially and in terms of cognitive or learning abilities. Often a child's ability to concentrate, focus and carry out their tasks in school may be compromised.

Also, children who grow up in home where there is domestic violence are at significantly increased risk of becoming a direct victim of violence—through intervening or being caught in middle.

Can such traumatized children heal?
Yes, absolutely, and I think it's important to say that children respond in a range of ways. Some children are affected more than others. That has to do with many factors, including temperament, the support a child has in her environment and whether it's a chronic or single episode.

I treated an 8-year-old boy who witnessed several assaults on Mom by Dad, and who was referred to us because of problems concentrating. He talked in his sessions about how worried he was for his mother's safety and his mixed feelings about being angry at and scared of dad, but also loyal and loving. When asked whether counseling helped he said, "It's like the counselor takes the thoughts out of my head." And he felt he could concentrate better—and his schoolwork began to improve.

We have to be careful not to think of these as "damaged" kids. Children are in many ways resilient. Interventions make a big difference, we can help.

What generally goes on in sessions with children and parents?
Usually the first session brings us together with the parent and child to see what the

concerns are and what's happening. Then we work with each alone, to see what the child has witnessed and what sense they make of the events. We work with parents to develop strategies for managing behavior and understanding symptoms.

We don't provide treatment for batterers and we don't see parents together if domestic violence is an issue. If the batterer has contact with child ... we would try to get a sense about the abuser's understanding of how violence has affected the child and his—and I use "he" because it's most often a male batterer—observations of the child's behavior. We do some work together to help the child feel more safe and secure.

If these kids don't get treatment, what happens when they become teenagers and adults?

This is an important question to ask, but it's almost safer to start in the other direction. What we worry about is that these children will engage in aggressive, violent behavior or become seriously depressed as they head into adolescence. We know that a high number of juvenile offenders have witnessed domestic violence. We worry that they will repeat the behavior, creating future generations of victims or abusers.

Clinically, there's a connection between having witnessed a violent event and being aggressive in one's behavior.

But it's also important to add: you'd never give up on a child, no matter his or her age. Even adults can be helped. We get calls from adults who want to address things they witnessed as a child. We don't know of any groups for adults dealing with witnessing violence specifically, but support groups and counseling can be helpful.

How are state and federal agencies and organizations reacting to this new information about children who witness violent acts?

The U.S. Justice Department has recently given a significant amount of funding to 12 communities to enhance community response to young children who are exposed to violence, and that's a big step in the right direction. In Massachusetts, for example, there has been statewide funding granted to a network of counseling programs specifically for

children who witness domestic violence.

Some ways that states have responded to this information are better than others. Most, if not all, are well-intended. However, there may be unintended consequences. In some states, if a child witnesses domestic violence, the child protection department is contacted and a report of neglect is filed. Our concern with making this mandatory is that it may punish the victim (most often the mother) by making allegations that she's failed to protect the children, when it's mostly the perpetrator's fault. There's a chance that through this, she may be re-victimized and the law may intrude on families in counterproductive ways.

A law in some states makes it a felony to commit a crime (including domestic violence) in the presence of children. But advocates are concerned that if victim defends herself and hits back, she could be charged with crime as well as the perpetrator. If it is a felony case, children may conceivably have to testify against parents. That's disconcerting. This bill is not widespread but there's a lot of buzz about it.

Where can people go to learn more about this issue, and how to get help or get involved?

People can call either their local domestic violence hotline or local battered women's service group. Also, the child mental health agency in your community can be a good resource.

We can all help by giving kids permission to talk, and by being willing to listen. Kids need safe places in their lives, communities, schools. And for those who've lived with domestic violence, services can be very helpful, critical even. It certainly helps to talk about it.

For More Information

Here are some resources for information or assistance:

- The Unite for Kids Web site helps children exposed to violence—you can find services and referrals, community events, legal information and ways to get

involved.

- Look for information on this in the Domestic Violence issue of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's *Future of Children* series.
- The Justice Department's National Domestic Violence Hotline and Web site is available 24 hours a day to provide help and information. The number is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
- The American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence site is a good source for legal information.
- The Minnesota Center Against Violence is not just for residents of Minnesota.
- The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence is a great one-stop clearinghouse for information and intervention help.

Caitlin Johnson is staff writer at Connect for Kids.

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